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Opinion

My Turn: Our POWs Shouldn't Have to Wait Anymore

Men like my father worked as slave laborers for the enemy. Isn't it time they were finally paid?

By Chris Dorsey, NEWSWEEK

Nov. 4 issue — My father never speaks of the atrocities he experienced in World War II. When he does talk, it's in his sleep. I remember first hearing my father's screams when I was perhaps 10 years old.

NIGHTTIME BROUGHT ANYTHING but rest for him, for his recurring nightmares took him back to places like Cabanatuan, O'Donnell and Bilibid notorious Japanese prison camps where humanity died, along with tens of thousands of his fellow American, Filipino, British and Australian POWs. It had been 35 years since he endured four years of starvation and physical and psychological torture at the hands of the enemy, and battles with malaria, dengue fever, beriberi and dysentery, but still the faces of his friends who did not make it back haunted him.

"Time does not heal all wounds," as a POW in Gavan Daws's book "Prisoners of the Japanese" put it, "it buries them in very shallow graves."

Dad was part of the 192d Tank Battalion from Janesville, Wis., a unit sent to Clark Field in the Philippines prior to the outbreak of war in the Pacific. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, they struck Clark Field almost simultaneously, destroying most of the American P-40s and B-17s on the runway. With the Pacific Fleet a shambles and no way to resupply the Americans in the Philippines, the GIs fell to the Nippon Army. American commander Gen. Edward King surrendered on April 9, 1942. It was the largest capitulation in American history; approximately 70,000 U.S. and Filipino soldiers were handed over to the Japanese.

What ensued came to be known as the Bataan Death March, one of history's greatest military horrors. Some 6,000 POWs perished as they were forced to march with little food and water in stifling heat. The march lasted 60 miles from the tip of the Bataan Peninsula to what became an infamous POW holding, Camp O'Donnell. Soldiers were beaten, bayoneted and decapitated along the way for attempting to drink from streams or pausing to rest. The worst instance of brutality occurred when the Japanese beheaded more than 300 members of the Philippine 91st Army Division by sword. When my father and his fellow POWs finally reached the camp, they remained there until MacArthur's

forces finally returned four years later. It proved an eternity of suffering; 30 percent of American POWs held by the Japanese died in captivity.

From the Philippines, many of the POWs were sent to Japan to work as slave laborers for a variety of industries. They were loaded like livestock aboard boats that came to be known as Hell Ships for the unsanitary and gruesome conditions found aboard them. In some cases there wasn't enough room to even sit down, and many of the men suffered from dysentery. Without access to a latrine, the POWs defecated on themselves and their fellow prisoners. One survivor of the Hell Ships, Capt. Forrest Knox of my father's battalion, once said that when a man goes mad, he doesn't scream, he howls. These are the same howls that echo in my father's nightmares.

Barely alive from malnutrition and disease, those who survived the trip—like my father—were forced at gunpoint to work in scores of businesses across the country. The Japanese paid little heed to the rules of the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of POWs, and company employees routinely beat prisoners. My father worked in a steel mill, for an electrical company and for a shipbuilder. Some of these companies are worth billions of dollars today.

Currently, members of Congress are considering whether it is legally possible for former POWs to seek damages from Japanese corporations for back wages. What is at issue is the standing of such cases in the wake of a 1951 U.S. treaty with Japan. The terms prohibit POWs from seeking war reparations from the Japanese government, but there are no provisions regarding the ability to seek compensation directly from private Japanese companies. For many of the surviving POWs, the legal action has little to do with lost wages. No survivor of the Japanese camps returned home the same man he had been when he left, and many of these men now want the world to know what happened to them, and their abusers to acknowledge their atrocities.

Our government and courts now must weigh the legal implications of a treaty against the wishes of an ever-dwindling group of aging men who are finally ready to share what happened in those dark days after 1942. Perhaps once their voices are heard, the nightmares will finally end.

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